Victim Notification
Common Questions Victims/Survivors May Ask

A Resource for Practitioners

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Victim notification is the process of contacting victims/survivors about the status of their cases and/or sexual assault kit (SAK) results. Typically, the term “victim notification” is used when a substantial period of time has passed between when the assault occurred and when law enforcement, advocacy, or other professionals are attempting to re-contact the victim/survivor.

Victims/survivors will likely have many questions about their cases, the SAK results, and what might happen next.

The purpose of this document is to provide law enforcement, advocacy, medical personnel, prosecutors, and other professionals who may be involved in victim notification with a list of common questions victims/survivors may ask and sample answers that can be provided.

The answers have been written in clear, simple language so that they can be understood by the lay person, unfamiliar with the forensic terminology, medical terminology, or the steps and stages of the criminal justice system.

The answers provide general information that applies to most cases. The information provided in this document should be used in conjunction with case-specific information that can be provided to the victim/survivor.

This document is a resource for practitioners conducting victim notification. Please do not give this to victims/survivors. Instead, use it as a resource to guide a conversation with victims/survivors.

A resource packet of community services is available to give to victims/survivors (“Detroit-Wayne County Community Services”).
Questions

» What is a sexual assault kit (SAK)?

A sexual assault kit is also called a SAK, or frequently referred to as a rape kit. The SAK is used as part of a medical forensic examination to collect evidence after a sexual assault. This might include swabs of any area where there was contact between the victim and the perpetrator or hair samples.

» When and where is the SAK done?

The SAK is collected after a sexual assault at a hospital or other medical facility. It is usually collected within the first 96 hours after the assault, but sometimes after that time frame. They try to do it as soon as possible so as to collect as much evidence as possible.

» Who does the SAK?

A health care provider, like a doctor or nurse, collects evidence from the victim’s/survivor’s body. This is just ONE of the services a health care provider can offer. The health care provider can also do a full exam to care for any injuries, and provide the victim with emergency contraception (the morning after pill) or other medication (perhaps to prevent contracting a sexual transmitted disease [STD] or HIV).

» Why is the SAK done?

The SAK is intended to help in the collection and preservation of potential evidence in a sexual assault case. Police and prosecutors may use this evidence to help them investigate a case.

» What is evidence?

Evidence is anything that can provide information as to what occurred. One piece of evidence from the SAK that may be very valuable is biological evidence (such as blood, saliva, and/or semen) that can be tested to identify the DNA from the perpetrator.
» What is DNA?

It stands for deoxyribonucleic acid. It exists in human cells, like in blood, bone, teeth, and hair, and is like a blueprint for how each human should be built. DNA is similar to fingerprints. Each person has unique fingerprints and each person, except for identical twins, has unique DNA unlike anyone else.

» Why is DNA so valuable/important?

DNA is like a fingerprint. No two people have the same fingerprint, and no two people, except for identical twins, have the same DNA. If someone’s fingerprints are found somewhere, it can be used to prove that they were there. Similarly, if someone’s DNA is found somewhere, it can be used to prove they were there.

» How does DNA get left behind?

DNA is in human cells. DNA is in saliva and skin cells. It is in sperm, blood, and other bodily fluids. A perpetrator may leave these fluids or skin cells on a sexual assault victim’s body. When these fluids or cells are left behind, DNA is too and might be able to be collected.

» What happens after a SAK is done?

The SAK may contain evidence of a crime, like DNA. It is important that the healthcare provider handle the evidence with care. If the victim decided to make a police report about the sexual assault and signed a release, the health care provider will turn over the completed SAK to a police officer. The next step is to take the SAK to the crime lab so that trained scientists can analyze it for DNA.

» How does the crime lab analyze for DNA?

The crime lab looks at the swabs and other items in the kit. They go through some of the swabs and samples to check for DNA. It is possible that they won’t find any DNA. If they do find DNA, they will create a DNA profile.
» What is a DNA profile and how is it used?

A DNA profile is a unique pattern of genes, specific to an individual. DNA profiles can be created from biological evidence found at the crime scene, such as blood, saliva, and/or semen. Once a DNA profile is created, it can identify an unknown suspect, confirm the presence of a known suspect, and/or connect an offender to multiple crime scenes.

» How are DNA profiles matched?

DNA profiles can be stored in a computer database. When a new DNA profile is created, it can be entered into the computer database and the database can scan to see if there is a match. In the United States, there is a master computer database called CODIS.

» What is CODIS?

CODIS stands for the Combined DNA Index System. There are two ways in which DNA is put into CODIS. One way is when a DNA profile from an unknown perpetrator is created from crime scene evidence and entered into the database. Another way is when the DNA profile from a known perpetrator is entered into the database.

» How does CODIS work?

CODIS stores DNA profiles. When a new DNA profile is created following a crime, it is entered into CODIS. If there is a match between the new DNA profile and an existing DNA profile in CODIS, it comes back as a “hit.” The new DNA profile will also be stored in CODIS for future searches.

» What is a CODIS “hit?”

A “hit” is when a new DNA profile is entered into CODIS and there is a match between this new DNA profile and some other DNA profile in the database.
» **If there is a CODIS hit, does it mean that the suspect has been identified?**

Not necessarily. The hit could be a match between the DNA collected in the SAK and the DNA of a known person. But it also could be a match to a DNA profile of an unknown suspect in another case, from a crime scene where the suspect has not yet been identified.

» **Why was the victim’s kit not analyzed before?**

A task force has been formed to look into this issue and figure out why this happened and to make sure it won’t happen again. At this point, we don’t have all the answers, but we are very sorry that this happened in this case.

» **What is going to happen next for this case?**

The Detroit Police Department and Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office are reviewing the information from CODIS. They will be working to gather more evidence and the victim will be updated when more is known about the case. The victim can also contact an advocate if he/she has additional questions or would like to know the current status of the case (provide advocate information).
References


